

Harriet Ritvo

Beasts in the jungle (or wherever)

When Byron wrote that “the Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold” (“The Destruction of Sennacherib,” 1815), his audience had no trouble understanding the simile or feeling its force, even though wolves had not threatened most British flocks since the Wars of the Roses. Almost two centuries later, expressions such as “the wolf is at the door” remain evocative, although the Anglophone experience of wolves has diminished still further. For most of us, they are only to be encountered (if at all)

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in zoos or in establishments like Wolf Hollow.

Located in Ipswich, just north of Boston, Wolf Hollow is the home of a pack of gray wolves who live a sheltered suburban existence behind a high chain-link fence. Their captivity has modified their nomadic habits and their fierce independent dispositions. (The pack was established twenty years ago with pups, so that only inherent inclinations, and not confirmed behaviors, needed to be modified.) Their relationship with their caretakers seems affectionate and playful, sometimes even engagingly dog-like – so much so that visitors need to be warned that it would be very dangerous for strangers to presume on this superficial affability. The animals themselves give occasional indications that they retain the capacities of their free-roaming relatives – that though apparently reconciled to confinement, they are far from tame. When large, loud vehicles rumble past on nearby Route 133, the wolves tend to howl. And despite their secure enclosure within the built-up landscape of North American sprawl, their calls evoke the eerie menace that has immemorially echoed through the wild woods of fairy tale and fable.

The symbolic resonance of large ferocious wild animals – the traditional rep-

representatives of what seems most threatening about the natural world – has proved much more durable than their physical presence. Indeed, their absence has often had equal and opposite figurative force. The extermination of wolves in Great Britain, along with such other unruly creatures as bears and wild boars, was routinely adduced as evidence of the triumph of insular (as opposed to continental) civilization in the early modern period. As they dispersed around the globe, British settlers and colonizers set themselves parallel physical and metaphorical challenges, conflating the elimination of dangerous animals with the imposition of political and military order. In North America, hunters could claim bounties for killing wolves from the seventeenth century into the twentieth, although by the latter period wolves had abandoned most of their historic range, persisting only in remote mountains, forests, and tundras. In Africa and (especially) Asia, imperial officials celebrated the “extermination of wild beasts” as one of “the undoubted advantages . . . derived from British rule.”¹

Very occasionally, large aggressive predators could symbolize help rather than hindrance. They served as totems for people whose own inclinations were conventionally wolfish or leonine. And alongside the legendary and historical accounts of big bad wolves existed a minority tradition that emphasized cooperation rather than competition. From this perspective, the similarities of wolf society to that of humans implicitly opened the possibility of individual exchange and adoption. A slender line of imagined lupine nurturers ran from the foster mother of Romulus and Remus, to Akela, who protects and mentors

1 Edward Lockwood, *Natural History, Sport, and Travel* (London: W. H. Allen, 1878), 237.

Mowgli in *The Jungle Book* (1894). But in this way, as in others, Kipling’s animal polity looked toward the past rather than the future. By the late nineteenth century, human opinions of wolves and their ilk had indeed become noticeably mixed. The cause of this amelioration, however, was not an altered understanding of lupine character or an increased appreciation of the possibilities of anthropolupine cooperation, but rather a revised estimation of the very qualities that had made wolves traditional objects of fear and loathing.

The shift in European aesthetic sensibility that transformed rugged mountains into objects of admiration rather than disgust is a commonplace of the history of aesthetics. For example, in the early eighteenth century, even the relatively modest heights of what was to become known as the English Lake District impressed Daniel Defoe as “eminent only for being the wildest, most barren and frightful of any that I have passed over in England, or even in Wales itself.”² The increasingly Romantic tourists who followed him gradually learned to appreciate this harsh, dramatic landscape, so that a century later the noted literary opium-eater Thomas De Quincey could characterize the vistas that had horrified Defoe as a “paradise of virgin beauty.”³ Of course, this altered perception had complex roots, but it is suggestive that it coincided with improvements in transportation and other aspects of the infrastructure of tourism.

2 Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ed. P. N. Furband and W. R. Owens (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 291.

3 Thomas De Quincey, *Literary Reminiscences from the Autobiography of an English Opium Eater*, vol. 3, *The Works of Thomas De Quincey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1851), 310–311.

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As economic and technological developments made the world seem safer and more comfortable, it became possible to experience some of its extremes as thrilling rather than terrifying. Or, to put it another way, as nature began to seem a less overwhelming opponent, the valence of its traditional symbols began to change. Ultimately (much later, after their population numbers and geographic ranges had been radically reduced), even wild predators began to benefit from this reevaluation. The ferocity and danger associated with wolves and their figurative ilk became a source of glamour, evoking admiration and sympathy from a wide range of people who were unlikely ever to encounter them. As representatives of the unsettled landscapes in which they had managed to survive, they inspired nostalgia rather than antagonism.

Supplementing these symbolic shifts were shifts in scientific understanding, which redefined high-end predators as a necessary element of many natural ecosystems. Late-nineteenth-century attempts at wild animal protection were modeled on the hunting preserves of European and Asian elites. Thus the immediate antecedents of modern wildlife sanctuaries and national parks were designed to protect individual species that were identified as both desirable (whether intrinsically or as game) and in danger of extinction, whether the bison in North America or the giraffe in Africa. They were much less concerned with preserving the surrounding web of life. In fact, most early wildlife-management policies had the opposite effect. Although not all of the species targeted for protection provided conventional hunting trophies – for example, by the end of the nineteenth century, many great ape populations received some form of protection – all were herbivores.

Further, none offered significant resistance to human domination of their territory. (If they did, policies could be reversed. For example, hippopotami, which enjoyed protection in some parts of southern Africa, were slaughtered with official encouragement in Uganda, where their belligerent attitude toward river traffic interfered with trade.⁴) Predators inclined to kill the species designated for protection received no protection themselves, either physical or legal. On the contrary, in many settings people simply replaced large predators at the top of the food chain and showed no mercy to their supplanted rivals.

Deep ancient roots can be unearthed for holistic or ecological thinking. Although most of the British pioneers of game preservation had enjoyed the classical education prescribed for privileged Victorian boys, the works of Charles Darwin may have offered more readily accessible arguments for understanding biological assemblages as interconnected wholes. Darwin provided many illustrations of the subtle and complex relationships among the organisms that shared a given territory. For example, in *On the Origin of Species*, he explained the frequency of several species of wildflowers in southern England as a function of the number of domestic cats kept in nearby villages. The cats had no direct interest in the flowers, but more cats meant fewer field mice, which preyed on beehives – therefore fewer mice meant more bees to fertilize the flowers.⁵ Nev-

4 Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 284 – 289.

5 Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* [1859] (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), 73 – 74.

ertheless, it was not until the last half of the twentieth century that wildlife managers routinely considered individual species as components of larger systems, and that the standard unit of management became the ecosystem rather than the species.

In consequence, large predators were redefined as essential components (even indicators) of a healthy environment rather than blots on the landscape. They often began to receive legal protection, however belated and ineffective. And there has been a movement to reintroduce them to areas that have been ostensibly preserved in their wild form or that are in process of restoration. Thus in recent decades wolves have reoccupied several of their former habitats in the western United States, both as a result of carefully coordinated reintroduction by humans, as in Yellowstone National Park, and as a result of independent (but unimpeded) migration from Canada. It is interesting that the reemergence, or even the prospective reemergence, of the wolf has inspired a parallel reemergence of traditional fear and hostility among neighboring human populations.

I have been using several terms as if their meanings were clear and definite, when in fact they are contested and ambiguous. The cultural critic Raymond Williams characterized 'nature' as "perhaps the most complex word in the English language."⁶ The term 'wilderness' is similarly problematic. In the context of preservation or restoration, it often collocates with words like 'pristine' and 'untouched,' and therefore connotes a condition at once primeval and static. This connotation suggests that the first task of landscape stewards is to identify

6 Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 184.

this ur-condition, but even a moderately long chronological perspective suggests that any such effort is bound to be quixotic. The environment in which modern animals have evolved has never been stable. Less than twenty thousand years ago, glaciers covered much of North America and Eurasia. After their gradual release from the burden of ice and water, most northern lands continued to experience significant shifts in topography and climate – and, therefore, in flora and fauna. These natural changes have been supplemented for thousands of years by the impact of human activities. The theoretical and political problems presented by 'wilderness' are knottier still. In a groundbreaking essay published more than a decade ago, William Cronon argued that wilderness and civilization (or 'garden') were not mutually exclusive opposites, but that they rather formed part of a single continuum. Far from being absolute, "the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity," wilderness was itself "a quite profoundly human creation."⁷ Cronon's formulation sparked (and continues to spark) agonized resistance on the part of environmentalists who base their commitment on the notion of untouched nature.

If wildness in landscape has been effectively (if controversially) problematized, the same cannot be said for wildness in animals. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the adjective 'wild' unambiguously and emphasizes its zoological application. The first sense refers to animals: "Living in a state of nature; not tame, not domesticated: opp. to TAME." In a standard lexicographical ploy,

7 William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 69.

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‘tame’ is defined with equal confidence and complete circularity as (also the first sense) “reclaimed from the wild state; brought under the control and care of man; domestic; domesticated. (Opp. to wild.)”

But outside the dictionary these terms are harder to pin down and their interrelationships are more complex. Like Cronon’s wilderness and garden, the wild and the tamed or domesticated exist along a continuum. In a world where human environmental influence extends to the highest latitudes and the deepest seas, few animal lives remain untouched by it. At least in this sense, therefore, few can be said to be completely wild: for example, it would be difficult so to characterize the wolves that were captured, sedated, airlifted to Yellowstone, and then kept in ‘acclimatization pens’ to help them adapt to their new companions and surroundings. And as the valence of the wild has increased, and its definition has become more obviously a matter of assertion rather than description, the boundaries of domestication have also blurred.

Not that they were ever especially clear. As twenty-first-century wolves belong to a long line of animals whose wildness has been compromised, tamedness has conversely also existed on a sliding scale. According to the OED, both ‘wild’ and ‘tame’ have persisted for a millennium, remaining constant in form as well as core meaning, while the language around them has mutated beyond easy comprehension, if not beyond recognition by modern Anglophones. But this robustness on the level of abstraction has cloaked imprecision and ambiguity on the level of application or reference. Although medieval farmers and hunters may have had no trouble distinguishing livestock animals from game or vermin, it would have been difficult

to extract any general definition from their practices. The impact of domestication varied from kind to kind, as well as from creature to creature. The innate aggression of the falcons and ferrets who assisted human hunters was merely channeled, not transformed; when they were not working, they were confined like wild animals in menageries. Then as now, people exerted much greater sway over their dogs than over their cats, who were mostly allowed to follow their own instincts with regard to rodents and reproduction. Medieval cattle, the providers of labor as well as meat, milk, and hides, led more constrained lives than did contemporary sheep; and pigs were often left to forage in the woods like the wild boars they closely resembled.

With hindsight, even these relatively tame cattle could appear undomesticated, especially as wildness gained in glamour. Thus changes in the animals’ physical circumstances were complicated by changes in the way they were perceived. In the late eighteenth century, for example, a few small herds of unruly white cattle, who roamed like deer through the parks of their wealthy owners, were celebrated as aboriginal and wild. As the Earl of Tankerville, whose Chillingham herd was the most famous, put it, his “wild cattle” were “the ancient breed of the island, inclosed long since within the boundary of the park.”⁸ The “ancient breed” was sometimes alleged to be the mighty aurochs (the extinct wild ancestor of all domestic cattle, which had been eliminated in Britain by Bronze Age hunters; the last one died in Poland in the seventeenth century), which gave these herds an ancestry distinct from that of ordinary domestic cat-

8 C. A. B. Tankerville and L. Hindmarsh, “On the Wild Cattle of Chillingham Park,” *Athenaeum* 565 (August 25, 1838): 611.

tle. To increase or underscore their distinctiveness, the white cattle were never milked, and if their meat was required for such ceremonial occasions as the coming-of-age of a human heir, they were hunted and shot, not ignominiously slaughtered. Through the nineteenth century, their autochthonic nobility continued to inspire the effusions of such distinguished poets and painters as Sir Walter Scott and Sir Edward Landseer, as well as the expenditure of newly wealthy landowners eager to bask by association in the prestige of wild nobility and ancient descent. But even at the height of their renown, it was clear that their claims to wildness included a large measure of wishful thinking. Skeptics persuasively wondered whether, even assuming that the nineteenth-century emparked herds lived in a state of nature, that state represented a historical constant or a relatively modern restoration.⁹ Many who investigated the background of the herds concluded that they were feral at best (at wildest, in other words) – that they were the descendants of domesticated animals, whether originally owned by Roman settlers or by later farmers. Modern anatomical and genetic research has confirmed these doubts, connecting the emparked herds with the ordinary domestic cattle of the medieval period.¹⁰ But so great is the

9 For an extended discussion of the history of this debate, see Harriet Ritvo, "Race, Breed, and Myths of Origin: Chillingham Cattle as Ancient Britons," *Representations* 39 (Summer 1992): 1–22.

10 For summaries of recent research see Stephen J. G. Hall and Juliet Clutton-Brock, *Two Hundred Years of British Farm Livestock* (London: British Museum (Natural History), 1989); Stephen J. G. Hall, "The White Herd of Chillingham," *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 150 (1989): 112–119; and Stephen J. G.

continuing appeal of wildness, and so limited the persuasive force of scientific evidence, that a recent president of the Chillingham Wild Cattle Association has nevertheless asserted that "although there is still much that is not known about the origins of the Chillingham Wild Cattle, one fact that is certain is that they were never domesticated."¹¹

Only a few people possessed the resources necessary to express their admiration for the wild, and their somewhat paradoxical desire to encompass it within the domestic sphere, on such a grand scale. But numerous alternative options emerged for those with more restricted acres and purses. An increasing variety of exotic animals stocked private menageries. The largest of these were on a sufficiently grand scale to have also included a cattle herd, if their owners had been so inclined – for example, those of George III or the thirteenth Earl of Derby, which accommodated large animals like kangaroos, cheetahs, zebras, and antelopes. Smaller animals required more modest quarters, and parrots, monkeys, canaries, and even the celebrated but ill-fated wombats owned by the poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti could be treated as pets. Breeders attempted to enhance or invigorate their livestock with infusions of exotic blood. If they were disinclined or unable to maintain their own wild sire, they could, in the 1820s and 1830s, pay a stud fee to the newly established Zoological Society of London for the services of a zebu or a zebra. In Australia, Russia, Algeria, and the United States, as well as in Britain and France, the acclimatization societies of the late nineteenth cen-

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Hall, "Running Wild," *Ark* 16 (1989): 12–15 and 46–49.

11 Ian Bennet, "Chillingham Cattle," *Ark* 18 (1991): 22.

tury targeted an impressive range of species for transportation and domestication, from the predictable (exotic deer and wild sheep) to the more imaginative (yaks, camels, and tapirs).¹² So difficult (or undesirable) had it become to distinguish between wild animals and tame ones that exotic breeds of domestic dogs were exhibited in Victorian zoos, and small wild felines were exhibited in some early cat shows.

The popular appeal of wild animals has continued to increase as they have become more accessible, either in the flesh or in the media. So entangled are wildness and domesticity that it is now necessary to warn visitors to North American parks that roadside bears may bite the hands that feed them, and it is now possible for domesticated animals to represent nature. This extended symbolic reach was demonstrated in 2001, when foot-and-mouth disease struck British livestock. Because the disease spreads rapidly and easily, the government prescribed a cull not only of all infected herds and flocks, but of all apparently healthy livestock living in their vicinity. Although outbreaks were widespread, the greatest number of cases occurred in the Lake District, the starkly dramatic landscape that had been disparaged by Daniel Defoe and praised by Thomas De Quincey; it is now the site of England's largest national park. Video and print coverage of the cull, which took the spectacular form of soldiers shooting flocks of sheep and then immolating them in enormous pyres, thus featured some of the nation's most cherished countryside as background.

The ovine victims also had iconic status. Many of them belonged to the local Herdwick breed, and at first the intensive cull seemed to threaten its very sur-

vival. What was at stake was not merely adaptation to a demanding environment, since several other British hill breeds look very much like the Herdwicks and share their physical and emotional toughness. The Herdwicks' special claim to consideration was their connection to their native ground, itself a kind of national sacred space. Not only were the sheep acknowledged to possess detailed topographical information about the hills they inhabited, but their owners claimed that they transmitted it mystically down the generations, from ewe to lamb. So well recognized was their attachment to their home territories that when a farm was sold, the resident Herdwicks were conventionally included in the bargain, on the theory that if they were taken away, they would soon manage to return. And despite strong historical indications that the ancestral Herdwicks had arrived in the vicinity of the Lake District by boat, and the further fact that all British sheep descend from wild mouflons originally domesticated in the eastern Mediterranean region, they were celebrated as indigenous, "peculiar to that high, exposed, rocky, mountainous district."¹³ An article in the preeminent Victorian agricultural journal asserted that the Herdwicks possessed "more of the characters of an original race than any other in the county" and that they showed "no marks of kindred with any other race."¹⁴ Twenty-first-century journalists reporting on the threatened toll of foot-and-mouth disease adopted similar rhetoric.

13 John Bailey and George Culley, *General View of the Agriculture of Northumberland, Cumberland, and Westmorland* [1805] (Newcastle: Frank Graham, 1972), 245.

14 William Dickinson, "On the Farming of Cumberland," *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England* 13 (1852): 264.

12 Ritvo, *Animal Estate*, 232–242.

As the sheep were nativized, they were also naturalized. A reporter for the *Independent* newspaper feared that if the Herdwicks disappeared, the whole ecology of the region might be changed “beyond recognition.”¹⁵ And since the dramatic bare uplands of the Lake District have been maintained by nibbling flocks for at least a millennium, his concern was not completely unreasonable. Thus, whether technically indigenous or not, and although they are incontestably domesticated, the Herdwicks have become compelling symbols of the apparently untamed landscape they inhabit – more compelling than the numerous wild birds and small mammals with which they share it. Like the landscape itself, they seem wilder than they are; that is, they appear to be independent and free-ranging, but their lives (and, indeed, their very existence) are ultimately determined by human economic exigencies. They are both accessible (that is, there are a lot of them and they are everywhere, not only in the fields but grazing and napping beside the roads and even on top of them) and also inaccessible (that is, they are skittish and tend to retreat when approached). The armed assault on the Herdwick sheep was therefore perceived as an attack on both the domesticated countryside and the unspoiled natural landscape. In both the sheep and their environment the wild and the tame had inextricably merged.

If vernacular usage illustrates the increasing slippage between wildness and tameness in animals, scientific classification has made a similar point from the opposite direction. The species concept has a long and vexed history. The study

15 Ian Herbert, “Foot and Mouth Crisis: Cumbria,” *Independent*, March 27, 2001, 5.

of natural history (or botany and zoology) requires that individual kinds be labeled, but for many plants and animals (those that, unlike giraffes, for example, have very similar relatives) it has often been difficult for naturalists to tell where one kind ends and the next begins. Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection provided a theoretical reason for this difficulty, while his shrewd observations that “it is in the best-known countries that we find the greatest number of forms of doubtful value” and that “if any animal or plant . . . be highly useful to man . . . varieties of it will almost universally be found recorded” offered a more pragmatic explanation.¹⁶ The classification of domesticated animals has epitomized this problem. That is, none of them has become sufficiently different from its wild ancestor to preclude the production of fertile offspring (the conventional if perennially problematic definition of the line between species), and some mate happily with more distant relatives. Nineteenth-century zookeepers enjoyed experimenting along these lines, and zoogoers admired the resulting hybrids between horses and zebras, domestic cattle and bison, and dogs and wolves.¹⁷

Despite these persuasive demonstrations of kinship, however, ever since the eighteenth-century emergence of modern taxonomy, classifiers have ordinarily allotted each type of domestic animal its own species name. While recognizing the theoretical difficulties thus produced, most modern taxonomists have continued to follow conventional practice. Domestic sheep are still classified

16 Darwin, *Origin of Species*, 50.

17 Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid, and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 92 – 95.

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as *Ovis aries* while the mouflon is *Ovis orientalis*, and dogs are *Canis familiaris* while the wolf is *Canis lupus*. The archaeozoologist Juliet Clutton-Brock explains this practice as efficient (it would be unnecessarily confusing to alter widely accepted nomenclature) as well as scientifically grounded, at least to some extent (most domestic animal populations are reproductively isolated from wild ones by human strictures, if not by biological ones).¹⁸ But it also constitutes a simultaneous acknowledgment of the artificiality of the distinction between wild animals and domesticated ones, and of its importance and power. Vernacular understandings can trump those based on anatomy and physiology.

The implications of making or not making such distinctions extend beyond the intellectual realm. They construct the physical world as well as describing it. Although the howls of the wolf may retain their primordial menace, the wolves who make them have long vanished from most of their vast original range, and are threatened in much of their remaining territory. To persist or to return, they need human protection, not only physical but legal and taxonomic. With the advent of DNA analysis in recent decades, the taxonomic stakes have risen, so that even animals that look and act wild may be found genetically unworthy. For example, efforts to preserve the red wolf, which originally ranged across the southeastern states, have been complicated by suggestions that it is not a separate species, but a hybrid of the gray wolf and the coyote. No such aspersions have been cast upon the pedigree of the gray wolf, but nevertheless every attempted gray wolf restoration has trig-

gered human resistance, and local challenges to their endangered status inevitably follow even moderate success. If domestic dogs were returned to their ancestral taxon, wolves would become one of the most common animals in the lower forty-eight states, rather than one of the rarest. Their survival as wild animals depends on the dog's continuing definition as domesticated – an indication of the extent to which unsettled landscapes and their inhabitants are the product of human ideas about what is natural and what to do about it.

18 Juliet Clutton-Brock, *A Natural History of Domesticated Mammals* (London: British Museum (Natural History), 1987), 194 – 197.